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Women in Daoism by Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn (Review)

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NOTES

1. Chung-ying Cheng, in his discussion of *qi* in the *Encyclopedia*, calls it, as do many, “vital force.” He says that *qi* suggests “an internal life force. That force can produce consciousness, knowledge, and wisdom” (p. 615). Judging from this explanation of *qi*, it does not seem to have much in common with Aristotle’s notion of the physical.

2. Elsewhere, however, Ames, in conjunction with David L. Hall, refers to *zhengming* as “ordering names,” whereby he criticizes its “prevailing interpretation” as “rectification of names” for failing to “give full account to the performative force of naming” and tending “to treat names in terms of some theoretical schema that has been inherited out of the tradition, and that can be hypostatized and hence rectified by behaviors that satisfy the standing theoretical construct” (Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987], p. 270). According to this view, the term “rectification of names” is too static, implying that there is merely one ideal form to which a name should conform. Chung-ying Cheng, in his discussion of *zhengming* in the *Encyclopedia*, makes use of the conventional translation, but his use of the term seems to take a hermeneutic or historical dimension into account, at least in the case of Xunzi, from whom, as he says, “the doctrine of rectifying names” acquired “a historical and theoretical foundation” (p. 872).

3. In his *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2000).



Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn. *Women in Daoism*. Cambridge, MA: Three Pines Press, 2003. viii, 296 pp. Paperback \$25.00, ISBN 1-931483-01-9.

The *Daodejing* observes: “Everything embodies *yin* and embraces *yang*; through the blending of these *qi*, they attain harmony” (chapter 42). How, one may ask, does this *yin-yang* interplay actually take place in the universe and in human life? What is the role and function of the *yin* force? How does *yin* play out in many aspects of human life? *Women in Daoism* by Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn, perhaps for the first time, takes its readers on a journey to discover the dynamic world of *yin* supremacy, particularly as *yin* is manifested in the multifaceted roles, functions, and realities of women’s lives. Their impressive effort succeeds in transforming what would otherwise be a merely conceptual investigation into a rich narrative disclosing the vivid world of women in Daoism that allows readers to envision what it would be like to seek genuine harmony with the universe.

The book is divided into three parts and ten chapters. Each of these is subdivided into topics ranging from “The Mother of the Dao” to “Women’s Inner Alchemy.” The first part, on “Goddesses,” goes beyond identifying these divine objects of religious devotion and offers an appreciation of the Daoist worldview

and the role of women within it. The second part, on “Immortals and Ordinands,” surveys the actual records of women’s lives throughout Chinese history, the communities in which they have sought spiritual perfection, and whatever teachings that they impart to other women who might take up the path to immortality. The third part, on “Women’s Transformation,” is a detailed description and analysis of actual Daoist practices, culminating in the inner alchemy by which immortality, flowing from a life progressively liberated from the conventions and restraints of the patriarchal family, can actually be achieved. This book is not simply an attempt at Chinese intellectual history but an exceptional invitation to contemporary women to discover what might be the most valuable quality in their own lives and to cultivate it accordingly.

The complexity of Chinese women’s identities, roles, and actual lived experience has become an increasingly central topic for investigation. Much work has been done on the Confucian tradition, focusing on the relationship between Confucianism and women. But little attention has been directed toward the Daoist tradition. This book offers a significant resource for moving in that direction. The authors insightfully point out that “Daoism offers a social alternative for women in that it opens paths to pursue their own goals as independent agents, be it the practice of self-cultivation, service as mediums, nuns, or priests, or [the] attainment of immortality” (p. 5). These options have provided women with a reliable path toward spiritual wisdom and emancipation.

Five basic images of the roles of women have emerged from the authors’ analysis of the history of Daoism: (1) the female as mother, the life-giver and nurturing power of the universe; (2) women as representative of the cosmic force of *yin*, which fully complements the male *yang*; (3) women as authoritative teachers in the esoteric movements of religious Daoism; (4) women as possessors of empowering supernatural techniques who have the wisdom to use them properly; and (5) the female body as the seat of the essential ingredients and processes of spiritual transformation (p. 5). While these roles have materialized at different stages of history, a full grasp of the magnitude of the presence of women in Daoism requires a critical evaluation of each cumulative impact.

At the risk of simplifying the rich lessons to be gathered from this book, let me highlight just three important themes from its abundant contents.

First, there is the *construction of an ontological basis for the female identity*. The authors offer a convincing case that women, as representatives of cosmic *yin*, embody a distinctive set of forces and components in the universe. This awareness allocates a paradigm shift in the discernment of the roles of woman. In the mainstream of Confucian culture throughout history, women’s identity and self-worth have been defined and interpreted only in relation to others. A woman’s basic identity, for example as daughter, wife, and mother, is intrinsically connected with some other person, usually a male figure. In Daoism, the female iden-

tity expands to include a much greater ontological concern with inner states and cosmic attainment. Women are given a privileged position by virtue of their own existence, or simply because they are females. The female has a predetermined advantage in achieving the Daoist ideal—for example, in her primordial oneness with the Dao and in her maternal role as life-giver. Women are admired for the inherent potency of *yin* and respected for their natural capabilities and distinctive strengths, particularly in the process of transforming the basic energy of human life into a continuous channel toward health, virtue, and immortality.

Second, there is the *uniqueness of women's social roles*. Given the Daoist admiration for the cosmic value of women, the social roles open to women are greatly extended. Women are not only portrayed in the images of the Mother Goddess, who is worshipped by both men and women, they are also capable of becoming goddesses by following the teachings of the Dao. Thus, it becomes imperative to consider which women have fully embodied the most valuable and honorable female images. The book furnishes a good, comprehensive account. These women include the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), who possesses the way of Dao; the ancient immortals who followed the Dao and achieved immortality; and the holy women, Daoist nuns, who have pursued the Complete Perfection (pp. 167–171).

Third, there is the *celebration of the female body*. One intriguing and recurrent theme elegantly articulated in this book is the appreciation and achievement of women's self-control over her own body. The female body in Daoist tradition has “appeared in various ideal forms and historical personages, reflecting both general cultural Chinese attitudes and the different organizational constellations within religion” (p. 5). In many cultures the body has all too often been treated as an obstacle to the advancement of genuine humanity. But this book allows the possibility of setting aside the dualistic perception of body and mind by providing a much more profound and naturalistic view of the human body, especially the female body. In the Daoist tradition, the body turns into the indispensable material basis for spiritual refinement. A proper cultivation makes possible the expression and manifestation of each individual's cosmic destiny. Thus the body is redefined as a network of celestial palaces, the seat of complex cosmic forms and patterns that may be crafted and disciplined for the purpose of genuine self-realization.

Women in Daoism provides the requisite materials not only for studying the place of women in the Daoist religion but also for gaining philosophical insight into the Daoist way of life. One of the many extraordinary benefits of this book is its accessibility. Although the texts under discussion are sometimes esoteric, the book itself is clearly written and immediately captures the reader's attention. With its abundance of references to secondary materials and lively discussion of

current scholarship, it promises to broaden one's understanding of a number of issues and deserves a wide readership.

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Magnus Fiskejö, editor. "Reconsidering the Correlative Cosmology of Early China." Special issue, *Bulletin [of] The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities Östasiatiska Museet, Stockholm* (Värnamo, Sweden: Fälth and Hässler), no. 72 (2000). 196 pp. Paperback, SEK 400 (approx. \$55.00), ISSN 0081-5691.

Although the characterizations of early Chinese correlative cosmology differ in each of the six articles presented here, these characterizations generally refer to the view of the world in which existence and change are understood in terms of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases (earth, air, water, wood, and fire) and in which things of the same category are believed to be mutually responsive. Of these six articles, four are directly concerned with analyzing issues specific to this cosmology (those by Haun Saussy; Steve Farmer, John Henderson, and Michael Witzel [hereafter Farmer et al.]; Aihe Wang; and Jessica Rawson), and two are not (those by Michael Puett and Hans-Georg Moeller). I will discuss these two groups separately.

Two features typical of modern works dealing with Chinese correlative cosmology are (1) diagrams created by the author to illustrate visually the structural or typological systems of atemporal relations among *yin-yang* and the Five Phases and (2) the claim that these relations represent central aspects of a uniquely Chinese way of thought. Each of these four articles, to varying degrees, confronts and criticizes the essentializing consequences of this practice, in one of two ways. The first, pursued by Farmer et al. and Rawson, is to demonstrate that Chinese correlative cosmology is the product of historical processes of change and gradual development. The second, pursued by Saussy and Wang, is to demonstrate that the common understanding of this cosmology as uniquely Chinese is largely the product of the breakdown of dialogue between sinology and the other human